

Life the Test of Learning.

A

DISCOURSE

BEFORE THE

GRADUATING CLASS OF HARVARD COLLEGE,

Delivered June 15, 1856.

BY

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PREACHER TO THE UNIVERSITY, AND PLUMMER PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN MORALS.

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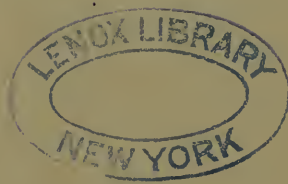
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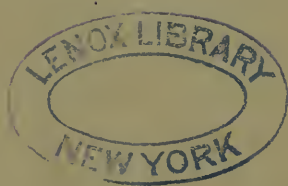
WHO IS A WISE MAN AND ENDUED WITH KNOWLEDGE AMONG YOU ?
LET HIM SHOW OUT OF A GOOD CONVERSATION HIS WORKS WITH
MEEKNESS OF WISDOM. — James iii. 13.

IF we remember that the term that is here rendered “ conversation ” bears a larger signification than we commonly attach to that English word, — meaning the whole action of life, the development of character, the way a man works, turns, or behaves himself in the world, — *ἀναστροφή*, — and if we remember that on that term falls the main emphasis of the sentence, we shall get from the whole passage a general declaration of remarkable point, and quite appropriate to the special bearing of this service.

The scope of the writer's thought, paraphrasing the statement a little, will be something like this : — You speak of knowledge. You value intellectual attainments. You honor wise or learned men. But why do you value those attainments ? Who are your wise men ? Let Christian truth tell you. The use of knowledge is to guide and elevate conduct. Wise men, or well-educated men, are those that make what they know illuminate and enrich what they do. The

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proper termination of study is a strong, simple, consistent character. The best attainments always produce a certain humility, or reverence, — a sense of dependence on the great Source of Light, God, — what is called “the meekness of wisdom.” This feeling is an inspiration to religious actions. The more learning a true man gets, the more widely, the more accurately, the more profoundly, he will see and think; and so, by consequence, the more he will *see* what earnest labors there are to be done; the more he will *think* of the claims of God and man upon him to turn all his resources and energies into the channel of a beneficent activity. His attainments will be worth having, just in proportion as they are assimilated with the vital forces of his manhood; and, by entering into the currents of spiritual purpose and affection, they will inspire and nourish his soul. If you would find out who among you is endued with knowledge, and who is not, you can apply this proof. Inquire who puts his knowledge into a “good conversation,” — a noble or beautiful manner of living, — *καλὴ ἀναστροφή*. In a word, Character is the final cause of study. Life is the test of learning.

I cannot help asking you to notice, in passing, how exactly this idea fits in with the peculiar characteristic of James, the Apostle that wrote this letter to the churches. There is always a moral interest in a coincidence between a man and his speech. It makes the man more valid, and the speech more credible, besides confirming and comforting our faith in human sincerity generally. The New Testament is full of these marks of genuineness. And they are nowhere seen in a more striking and unconscious appearance

than in James. Pre-eminently, he was the Apostle of practical service. The first question about everything with him was, What will it render of living, human goodness? Or, in our common phrase, How will it work? Let it be opinion, or faith, or preaching, or charity. What are its fruits? What does it come to? So, here, of knowledge. Conduct is the criterion of knowledge. Unless it yields a goodly harvest here, much study is only a weariness to the flesh, and a vanity of the mind.

A moment has come when you, my friends, whom it is my privilege to address especially to-day, can hardly help putting to yourselves the question, whether your education, thus far, is worth what you have given for it. The providence of God, who interests himself so paternally and solemnly in every new step we take, and who puts a voice of his own into every event, though it seems the most regular, or natural, or incidental, is urging that question home upon you. The interruption of a routine that has lasted several years, casts us back upon individual choice and absolute principle. It is divinely intended to. And so the closing up of one long and important term of intellectual training, so costly of time and means and faculty and strength, presses in the Christian inquiry, whether what has been gained is equal to such pains expended.

An unprofitable and possibly a dismal question, if the answer were not still in your own power! But it is. The great test of Life is yet to be applied. And the time is coming. Whether what you have gathered here is to lie a crude and unproductive mass, in sluggish brains; or, whether it is to be per-

verted to the baleful purposes of a selfish and headstrong will, — all the elaborate apparatus of education turned into an engine of more effectual mischief; or whether it shall be given to the noblest objects of human hope, and thus consecrated to Christ; — this is the threefold choice that awaits your determination, not to be evaded by any ingenuity, not to be forfeited by any neglect. It is certainly a fit time, then, to meditate the true and righteous uses of a Christian scholarship. Three easy and tempting mistakes seem to me to lie directly before you, — I might say before us all, — exposing all our past industry to failure.

I. The first danger is indifference. False objects in life are positive destroyers; but the absence of any clear object is a waster almost equally consuming, and with one order of minds even more seductive. It would seem as if the natural effect of a comprehensive system of discipline must be to rouse the will and direct its aim. Why translate the tongues of so many tribes of men, if not to collect from them some completer interpretation of the riddle of our destiny? Why explore the mysterious geography of the mind itself, and interrogate the wondrous faculty by which all knowledge comes, if not to gain new data towards the solution of the oldest and deepest problem, — Why was I born? Why do I breathe? Whither do I tend? How is it possible to trace the moving processions of the ages, through paths seeming so trivial while they were trod, but so solemn in the echoes of their desertion, and not be sent back to watch with a wiser eye which way our own steps lead? The whole contemplation of history is an incitement to live purposely and earnestly. It is the very dig-

nity of science, that it reads off to us, not only the thoughts, but the plan of God, — a plan whose unity and method demand some reflection and some copy, even in natures so fantastic and wayward as ours. Every lesson from creation proposes a task to be done. Every disclosure of the Creator presents an end to be achieved.

Yet I need hardly remind you how often we miss this practical and personal issue of the most intelligent study, — ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of that simple truth! The lives of scholars, so peculiarly solicited and stimulated to the straitest determination, are given over, as often perhaps as others, sometimes it appears oftener than any others, — and certainly with a more palpable and melancholy abortiveness, — to aimless, nerveless, desultory chance. How the treasures rust in our hands! The smooth stones out of the brook drop unused from our grasp. The sling hangs loose at our side. Giant Error walks defiant and unchallenged at the head of his Philistine troops. The years run on, and no resolute helm guides the rocking keel toward a land of distinct and sacred promise. We are idly busy with living, careless of life. Two causes encourage this apathy.

One is, that the structure and habits of our industrial commonwealth expose the recent graduate from college to a period of uncertainty in his employment. It cannot be denied, I think, that at present there is some want of happy adjustment between the academic career and the public stations it precedes. The places of the higher and more intellectual labor are not organized in proportion to the mechanical

and trafficking vocations. The developments of modern civilization have much widened the range of selection, and almost bewilder the judgment. Two or three clean-cut professions, technically learned, do not, as formerly, distribute and absorb the whole educated force. The same professions, meantime, for better or for worse, cease to be technically, if not in any other sense, *learned*, and are occupied by candidates who have rushed up to their gates by a shorter road. The fact, however it comes about, seems to stand, that an increasing number of college-bred men wait, with an awkward pause, after their graduation, undecided yet of what their "commencement" shall be the beginning. Unless some positive predilection or early bias has happened to settle their choice for them, an interval of doubt disturbs and enfeebles the steady drift and tenacity of their resolves. It is a crisis of trial and peril. Some men are hurried by it into a choice that is foolish, and profanes the after-existence. Others are diluted by it into a spongy softness, and fall off into habits of literary generality, or sentimental imbecility. What is wanted is a Christian efficiency of purpose, — a Christian decision not to let haste spoil the material, — a Christian decision not to be content with vacillation. Delay too long, and there creeps upon the soul a fatally satisfied unconcern. The descent is easier, because the goads and exactions of a systematic discipline have just been taken off; the indolent free-will often finds the charming liberty to do what it pleases a wretched liberty to do nothing. Be guarded against this dull catastrophe. Let not the bright beginning slouch into a stupid sequel. What thy

hand or thy brain findeth to do, do it with thy might. For he only is the wise man, and endued with knowledge among you, who keeps his life lively, and shows fruits of his study in a goodly conversation.

Another cause of indifference to any lofty and religious uses of education is a subservience to the routine of professional tasks. When the profession has been chosen and entered, it may still put on a yoke. Recurring drudgeries deaden enthusiasm. The first ardor fades off. Monotony sings its drowsy tune. Commonplace efforts will do for commonplace business; why stretch the powers beyond their wonted mood? Mediocrity is safe and practicable; why spur the aspirations by a swifter measure? Because, answers Christianity, they are the glory of your being. Because unbounded powers are insulted by arbitrary limits. Because the conquest of the possible into the actual is the keenest fascination of true courage. Because God never made us, and his institutions never nurtured us, to be sluggish grinders in the mill of repetition, but fellow-wrestlers with the heroes and apostles,—striving for the great mastery, pressing toward the mark. And there is but one victory, but one mark. However sloth may sleep, or cowardice despair, or infidelity deny, there is nothing less than a practical and progressive ripening of the whole man for the glory of God, that can fill out the passion of the really “wise man endued with knowledge among you.” The first sentence of Milton’s tract on the reforming of education is an exposition of my text: “I am long since persuaded that, to do or say aught worth memory or imitation, no purpose

should sooner move us than simply the love of God and of mankind. The end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by learning to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to be like him,—as we may the nearest be by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection.” And how well he insists on this definite and living purpose of the scholar, when he speaks of “that methodical course wherein our gentle and noble youth must proceed, by the steady pace of learning onward, till they have confirmed and solidly united the whole body of their perfected knowledge, like the last embattling of a Roman legion”!

II. But beyond indifference whether learning has any grand object, — and sometimes, indeed, this side of it, — lies the hinderance of a poor self-seeking. Undoubtedly it is one of the most appalling proofs of the vigor of the selfish passions, that they survive as they do through all the liberalizing influence of a catholic culture, and resist the generous impressions of science, and even triumph over the charities of good-fellowship, in the base hunger for luxury or comfort. The Apostle does not say it is in a lucrative conversation, or a famous conversation, or a comfortable conversation, that the works of the real wisdom are shown forth, but in a “*good* conversation.” Nor is it in the pride, the distinction, the notoriety, or the emoluments of wisdom, — the office, the salary, the applause, the furniture, — but in “the meekness of wisdom.” It is Wisdom for her own pure and precious sake, — or rather for His

sake who possessed her of old, in the beginning, when he laid the foundations of the earth, — that he loves and pursues. If scholarship holds itself affronted by being degraded into the low wrangle of appetites, for precedence or gold, religion calls it sacrilege. The right question, when you are laying your plans for the future, is not, Which will yield me the best living? but, Which will yield me the best life? It cannot be that you have been out in the fields of learning seeking jewels, to bring them in and lay them down as purchase-money for equipage or compliments. The legitimate children of Mammon, schooled, not, as you have been, in the ample and serene atmosphere of unselfish thought, but in the closer chambers of mercenary calculation, — trained, not, as you have been, in the royal company of great persons from antiquity downward, but in the scramble and devices of gain, — will beat you in that rivalry; and they ought to. How your educated strength shall be devoted, should be settled by another reference than the stock-list or the tax-bill. All honest callings are honorable. If you carry your acquirements into commerce, you may enter into a worthy and magnanimous competition. There is scope there for your largest faculty, and there is need there of the broadest philosophy. But you cannot decently go to turn your talents *into* merchandise, to forget the communion with high examples, to square your notions of civil affairs by the self-interest of the market, to sell the nobility of art and letters for some rich bargain, to barter conscience for tariff or dividends, — to let your independent duty as citizens and as patriots be appointed

for you by the narrow gossip of the exchange or the contracts of brokers' boards. Bear into whatever mercantile engagements or profitable alliances you encounter, a spirit that is genial with the sympathies of all the peoples you have conversed with, — self-denying with old sacrifices, fragrant with the mountain air of meditation, sacred with the veneration of holy traditions. Breathe the spirit of your studies into the haunts of Trade. Touch the rough customs of shops with the grace of a genuine refinement. And do all that modesty will allow to raise the strifes of property into a statelier degree, by asserting everywhere the supremacy of thinking man over his possessions, and of simple justice over all the policies and expedencies of the hour. Maintain everywhere the absolute dignity of Truth, who has chosen you once as her disciples and heralds, — and never forget, however affluence bids for your souls, that you were here set apart and dedicated as priests in the unsordid Temple of Learning.

Consider, too, that there is a greediness of praise just as radically selfish, if not quite so carnal, as the lust for money. And precisely because it wears a more intellectual look, it is a sin that offers a more acceptable bait to cultivated men. But there is nothing in it of "the meekness of wisdom." The selfishness of vanity is at its root, and the selfishness of ostentation is in its branches, — and green jealousies are canker-worms on all its leaves. He is not half-educated, not the wise man, nor endued with knowledge among you, who suborns the common largesses of the past into a stepping-stone to personal renown, and prizes the light that is sent to

warm the whole race into a brotherhood, only for the distinctions it reveals between himself and his kind. Not that is the genuine scholar's temper, nor the goodly conversation.

III. Thirdly, it is no business of the liberal and Christian scholar to become the hired servant of party prejudice or sectarian interests. Science is given and got for no such contemptible uses. Students are congregated in a still and separate spot, on neutral ground, remote as may be from all political and ecclesiastical chicanery, on purpose that they may grow and expand, aloof from the warping forces of controversy. But, in a social state like ours, it would take more than a Chinese wall, or the rules of monastic seclusion, to shut out even from academic groves the intruding conflicts of the forum and the convention. Before you have passed out of the hearing of the College bell, the recruiting officers of state and church will besiege you for your pledge. Consider carefully, I pray you, before you give it to any of them, how much you give with it, — whether your manhood, whether your individuality, whether your liberty of speech, whether the sanctity of a fearless conviction. Here again scholarship and Christianity both unite to put you on your guard. There are little coteries enough, in art, in letters, in social opinion, in public policy, in theologic speculation, that will be delighted to enroll a new name on their lists. Their captains will electioneer for you while you are free, — flatter you when you consent, — patronize and cajole you when you are caught, — use and pay you while you succumb, — abuse and torment you when you rebel. Can you afford that servitude?

Can learning afford it in your persons? And who, in all these truckling and hard-drilled times, shall be honest and free, if not they whose minds have been balanced and poised by contemplating the reasons of things?

It is not against the more *open* and *offensive* aggressions of such combined interests that these warnings are directed, so much as against devices that are more specious and plausible. We have committed ourselves, in our social experiment, to the government of public opinion, even more than of public law. Unless the original fountains of it are kept healthy and pure, we are in the most complicated and disastrous of anarchies. Already thoughtful men cannot look far about them, without seeing what beginnings of ruinous and despotic power, of misjudgment, of defamation, of vituperation, are craftily growing up in these bigotries of our democracy. Truth is scarcely seen for what it is, but only for the image and superscription it bears, nor prized for its beauty, but for its currency. The few that venture on a practical assertion of the boasted liberality, have to be catechized, and menaced, and ostracized, so far as the puny persecutions of wordy batteries can ostracize. Oppose to these degrading dictations all the massive resistance of your knowledge, the muscle of your manhood, and the sincerity of your faith.

Faith, I say. For it is not the independence of self-will, not the vain ambition of peculiarity, not the insolent contempt of the past, or of other men, or of righteous authority, that I exhort you to. It is the honest loyalty to the one only Authority, instead of mortal counterfeits. It is the appeal from

custom to Christ, — from party and sect to the Holy Spirit, — from mortal majorities to God. There is no right religious reverence which does not fear the one only Master more than unpopularity or reproach. What we want is that humility, growing ever deeper with all growing heights of attainment, — that penitential confession of sins, that meekness of wisdom, which bends with unutterable awe before the secret voice of the Most High, before the open command of the Bible, and which, being turned “into a native and heroic valor,” makes men “hate the cowardice of doing wrong.”

Let us ponder, then, the great claims that are laid on our educated men. The country has claims, — never more than now. We need more of that sort of education which stirs and fosters, from beginning to end, a loyal zeal for the central and dominant ideas that lie at the foundation of the Republic. The scholar is not well trained that has not been formed day by day into a Christian patriot. Our universities ought all to be nurseries, not of national exclusiveness, or national vanity, but of a just national honor, virtue, and devotion. They should rear and send forth prophets for the American Israel, — prophets brave and blameless, and speaking ever with a “Thus saith the Lord,” — prophets that no sophistry can bewilder, no tyrant silence, no bludgeon terrify, no flattery blind. Out of libraries, and out of laboratories, and out of the forearming contests of debate, let them send forth, for each impending struggle of Right with Wrong, thinkers and speakers “fraught with a universal insight, ingen-

uous and matchless men." For as said that stanch old English republican of two centuries ago, in language suiting us to-day, There is a study of politics worthy of Christian scholars, "that they may not, in a dangerous fit of the commonwealth, be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such a tottering conscience, as many of our great counsellors have lately shown themselves, but steadfast pillars of the state."

Universal humanity has claims. That "good conversation" of the Christian scholar condescends to converse with the lowest offshoot of the human stock. That "meekness of wisdom" stoops gladly to help the weakest wayfarer; to hear the story of wrong or weakness from the faintest or most unlettered lips; to sympathize with the wants of the vagrant, or the sorrows of the slave; to bring all the sublime resources of culture, the magic of invention, and the facilities of genius, to ease the burdens of penury, to open the path to the helpless, to pay respect and wages to unpaid toil, to inspire brute force with intelligence, to marshal idle men and women and children into ranks of self-sustaining labor. This is a worthy end for the best scholarship of the age, —

"How best to help the slender store,
How mend the dwellings, of the poor, —
How gain in life, as life advances,
Valor and charity more and more."

Above all, Christ has claims. And his claims are supreme. They transcend, they underlie, they encompass, all beside. The Lord of souls is Lord of the sciences as well. Common gratitude challenges

obedience and love for Him, in whose name every hope of civilization moves to its fulfilment, and every affection of mankind realizes itself in peace. It must be a personal obedience, — a personal love. No general and cold confession, no vague and rhetorical loyalty, no heartless and high-sounding praises, can satisfy that Gospel of regeneration on which salvation depends. Penitence, trust, consecration, prayer, righteousness, — these will; for God is Love, and his forgiveness waits. Every thought and imagination must be brought into captivity to the holy obedience of the Son of God. All knowledge that is not rooted and centred there vanishes away. "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?" He is the believing student, the studious disciple.

Gentlemen of the Graduating Class, our doctrine culminates here.

Every considerable change in the *form* of our life is meant to suggest to us something original as to its spirit. The dissolving of one set of relations moves the question by what law new sets shall be organized. When farewells and distance threaten manly friendships, what is more unavoidable than to think what arm shall keep the friend that is parted from, and whether there is not One Friendship in whose Eternal and Almighty clasp every human affection finds its safety? The separation of classmates opens spaces about each one's personality which let in light from above on all your plans and habits. A change of residence puts us to asking why we live at all; how long we shall need any earthly dwelling; whether we deserve any. How shall your tuition

justify these years, and your future be adequate to the past?

That question, like every other that an earnest experience asks, God's Book of Life answers.

Life *is* the test of Learning. Character *is* the criterion of knowledge. Not what a man has, but what he is, is the question, after all. The quality of soul is more than the quantity of information. Personal, spiritual substance is the final resultant. Have *that*, and your intellectual furnishings and attainments will turn, with no violent contortion, but with a natural tendency and harmony, — a working together, conversation, ἀναστροφή, — to the loftiest uses. Add faith to knowledge, and your education will be worth what it has cost. Your lives will honor and justify your preparation. Say, every morning, with the simple confidence of the holy child in the Temple, "Lord, here am I!" and he will send you to noble and effectual victories. Your wisdom will tell to issues that are divine, and that wisdom the Eternal Providence will watch, because it is matured in the spiritual school of Him who knows all that is in man.

"Lift up your eyes to the fields; they are white already to harvest." With the blessing of that Providence, go to the field of your slow, patient work. That slowness of the result may be the bitterest element in the discipline.

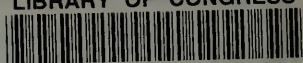
"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time."

Be content to wait for Him with whom ages are days.

" If but this tedious battle could be fought,
 With Sparta's heroes, at one rocky pass,
 One day be spent in dying, men had sought
 The spot, and been cut down like mower's grass.
 If in the heart of nature we might strive,
 Challenge to single combat the great power,
 Welcome the conflict ! But no ; half alive,
 We skirmish with our foe long hour by hour."

Nevertheless, — nevertheless, — in due season ye shall reap, if ye faint not. Go out with faith, with supplication. Ye shall come again in the Jubilee and Sabbath of the Resurrection rejoicing. And then, be content if it shall be with you as with the solemn pictured figures of the returning warriors, in the historical galleries of the Italian city, where the reverent and pious victors are seen, not in chariots, nor with sceptres, nor on thrones, nor with crowns on their heads, but kneeling, the crowns lifted in their hands, looking upward, and giving thanks to God.

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